

5. The Partition of India – a simmering volcano

A Backdrop to Partition

Reform in 1917 promised greater involvement of Indians “in every branch of administration.” A dyarchy, formed in 1919, extended powers to provinces which steered the wheel, whilst British authorities controlled the accelerator and brake. In 1935 a federation was rejected in favour of increased powers, with oversight, but Indians were no longer prepared to be ruled or taught. The Congress and Muslim League eyed each other with suspicion and jealousy, sparking occasional riots such as in Benares, where Hindus sold spun yarn to Muslim weavers. Provinces became self-governing on 1 April 1937, sharpening these divisions and tensions.

By 1939, composition of the high calibre Indian Civil Service was roughly equally Indian and British with greater Indian representation in public works and forestry service and less in the police. Developing self-governing institutions had less success. The great fear was dissention amongst the Muslim, Hindu and Sikh communities as the realities of independence dawned - and with this power and influence. Priorities had been law & order, justice, payment of taxes and land recording, now augmented by rural development, co-operative banks and village committees. District officers were pivotal but overburdened and swamped by these changes.

This may in part explain the Bengal famine of 1943 when ‘up to’ 3 million’ Indians died from starvation, drawing comparison with the death of 5 million in 1896-97. Soil moisture levels were higher than 1941. Crop infections, the fall of Burma to Japan halting rice imports, panic buying, speculative hoarding and continuing Indian rice exports contributed to the famine. Churchill blamed Indians for ‘breeding like rabbits.’ Insensitivity was coupled with absence of a food strategy, lack of organisation, pre-occupation with war and incompetence.

Wavell held a conference at Simla from 25 June to 2 July 1945 but this failed. Respected but disillusioned, he did his best. Diaries reveal he never liked the “arrogance and intransigence” of Jinnah, called by Wavell’s ADC the “Simla Saboteur.” For Wavell, Gandhi was the “real wrecker,” seeking to establish a “Hindu Raj,” and he was critical too of the British Cabinet. In March 1947 Mountbatten replaced Wavell. Independence was to be resolved - and quickly.

In the aftermath, history shows such volatile and violent events are not unique. Lessons were not learned from Colonial life regarding customs, cultures and religions in a form of imperial superiority, despite dire warnings by the East India Company not to interfere but this glosses over other factors. Preservation of life was key as was respecting the rights of minorities, including Dalits (Untouchables). For some Muslims, life was less important than pursuit of freedom. Of a Muslim population of 90 million, “what does it matter if we lose ten million.”

Legacies of British Rule

Barbaric acts, abhorrent to the British, were committed by Hindus, mainly suttee with widows thrown on the funeral pyre of husbands, female infanticide and thuggery, carried out mainly by Kali Hindus with almost inevitable death by strangulation. The British, attempting to exert control, committed atrocities too. The rock of British rule was the Indian Army of which 80% were sepoy, drawn from warrior classes. The mutiny at Vellore in 1806 in changing army dress regulations was a warning of insensitivity, repeated in 1857. A newly designed turban made of pig or cow hide sparked unrest, fuelled by poor pay and conditions. A cartridge, lubricated with animal fat, ignited a tinder box as before firing the ends had to be bitten off.

A mild skirmish in February was followed by the jailing of 85 men in the Bengal Light Cavalry at Mirath, near Delhi. More than "a thousand cut-throats and scoundrels of every sort" then descended on the jail, released the men, and massacred British officers wives and children. The riot soon spread. In June at least 200 women and children were killed at the besieged Cawnpore barracks, or later hacked to death.

The siege of Lucknow, was triggered by British annexation of the province of Oudh the year before. The garrison held out for nine months, until British forces arrived. Retribution was swift and merciless. In Peshawar 40 men, strapped to cannons, were blown apart and Delhi witnessed an orgy of slaughter.

The Government of India Bill 1919, was a complex mosaic of provincial delegation with central control but without Indian representation. An incensed Muslim League and National Congress signed the Lucknow Pact, committing India to independence. The fuse was now lit. Gandhi led striking textile workers and exploited peasants, seeking tax relief when crops failed.

Gandhi believed battles should be fought by satyrgrapha, passive resistance. The Defence of India Act 1915 permitted arbitrary detention but Whitehall felt its powers were inadequate. In 1919 Mr Justice Rowlatt chaired a committee of inquiry. Extension of powers and limitation of freedom passed into law, despite rejection by the Indian Imperial Legislative Council.

A nationwide day of protest was planned by Gandhi for 7 April 1919 with the closure of shops and businesses. Delhi went ahead on 30 March with rioting in the streets by mid-day. By the evening this has spread north into the Punjab. In Amritsar on 10 April two local nationalist leaders were arrested for subversion. Three days of riots ensued during which a rampaging mob burnt down the town hall and post office, set fire to banks and the railway station, cut telephone wires and murdered four Europeans.

On 13 April, the Baisakhi Festival was held. Over 5,000 people gathered early to celebrate the Hindu New Year and a major Sikh festival in and around the Jallianwala Bagh walled garden. A statement, read in four language, stated processions and public meetings were banned. Far from dispersing, by mid-afternoon the crowd had tripled to 15,000. Colonel Reginald Dyer, acting military commander for Amritsar was informed.

Fearing a mass riot, Dyer returned late afternoon with a detachment of Sikh, Ghurkha and Balachi troops. Without warning he blocked the gates and opened fire, directed into the dense crowd. In ten minutes of carnage, soldiers fired over 1,650 rounds, leaving 379 dead and over 1,200 injured. Troops and officers dispersed, allegedly having run out of ammunition. No arrangements were made for the care of the wounded and for removal of dead bodies.

Such events stay in the mind. Less conspicuous is the machinery of government controlling the whole of India through the Indian Civil Service, the Indian Medical Service and a raft of technical experts from railways and bridges to the design of buildings and irrigations systems. Many sought a different experience, a sense of adventure, a better quality of life and pursuit of ambition, including wealth and acquisition of status and influence.

Somewhat overlooked is a sizeable minority whose interests were altruistic and self-effacing. Most British serving in India, and those who continued to live there, felt a warmth and regard for the people of India. This was reciprocated to a large degree, whilst acutely conscious that, with each passing decade, independence was inevitable.

A Divided Nation – by William Dalrymple

“After the Second World War, Britain simply no longer had the resources with which to control its greatest imperial asset. Exit from India was messy, hasty, and clumsily improvised. Whereas British rule in India had long been marked by violent revolts and brutal suppressions, the British Army was able to march out of the country with barely a shot fired and only seven casualties. Equally unexpected was the ferocity of the ensuing bloodbath.”

Dalrymple refers to the Islamic capture of Lahore, in 1021 and to Persianized Turks from what is now central Afghanistan, seizing Delhi from its Hindu rulers in 1192. By 1323, they had established sultanates in Madurai to the south, Gujarat, in the west and Bengal, in the east.

“Medieval Sanskrit inscriptions don’t identify the Central Asian invaders by that (Muslim) term but linguistic, ethnic and perhaps non-religious affiliations, most typically Turushka—Turks. Although these conquests were marked by carnage and destruction of Hindu and Buddhist sites, India soon embraced and transformed the new arrivals. Within a few centuries, a hybrid Indo-Islamic civilization emerged, along with hybrid languages—notably Deccani and Urdu.” This mixed the Sanskrit-derived vernaculars of India with Turkish, Persian, and Arabic words.”

“Sufi mystics, associated with the spread of Islam, often regarded Hindu scriptures as divinely inspired. Some even took on the yogic practices of Hindu sadhus, rubbing their bodies with ashes, or hanging upside down while praying. In village folk traditions, the practice of the two faiths came close to blending into one. Hindus would visit the graves of Sufi masters, and Muslims would leave offerings at Hindu shrines. Sufis were especially numerous in Punjab and Bengal, the same regions that, centuries later, saw the worst of the violence.”

“In the 19th century, India was still a place where traditions, languages, and cultures cut across religious groupings, and where people did not define themselves primarily by their religious faith. A Sunni Muslim weaver from Bengal had far more in common in language, outlook, and fondness for fish with a Hindu colleague than he would with a Karachi Shia, or a Pashtun Sufi from the North-West Frontier.”

“As late as 1940, Partition might have been avoided,” not helped by a clash of personalities, particularly between Muhammad Ali Jinnah, the leader of the Muslim League, and Mohandas Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru, the most prominent leaders of the Hindu-dominated Congress Party. All three were Anglicized lawyers who had received at least part of their education in England. Jinnah and Gandhi were Gujarati and potentially could have been close allies. By the early 1940s their relationship was so poisonous they could barely sit in the same room.”

“Central to debate is Jinnah, responsible for creating Pakistan. In Indian-nationalist accounts, he appears as the villain; for Pakistanis, he is the Father of the Nation. Neither side were that keen to claim him, the Pakistanis “restricting him to an appearance on banknotes in demure Islamic costume.” Jinnah was a tough, determined negotiator with “a chilly personality,” yet in many ways a surprising architect for the Islamic Republic of Pakistan. A staunch secularist, he drank whisky, rarely went to a mosque, was clean-shaven, stylish, and wore beautifully cut Savile Row suits and silk ties. He chose to marry a non-Muslim, the glamorous daughter of a Parsi businessman, famed for her revealing saris and for once bringing her husband ham sandwiches on voting day.”

“Far from wishing to introduce religion into South Asian politics, Jinnah deeply resented the way Gandhi brought spiritual sensibilities into the political discussions, and once told him, as recorded by a colonial governor, that “it was a crime to mix up politics and religion the way he

had done." Around 1916 he strove to bring together the Muslim League and the Congress Party. He belonged to both parties, getting them to present the British with a common set of demands, the Lucknow Pact. Jinnah was hailed as "the Ambassador of Hindu-Muslim Unity."

"Jinnah felt eclipsed by the rise of Gandhi and Nehru after World War 1. In December 1920, he was booed off a Congress Party stage when calling his rival "Mr. Gandhi," rather than his spiritual title of Mahatma - Great Soul. In the 1920s and 1930s mutual dislike grew. By 1940 Jinnah had steered the Muslim League towards a separate homeland for the Muslim minority of South Asia, a position that he had previously opposed. Jinnah, according to Nisid Hajari, (an Indian analyst), used this as a bargaining chip. Even when the creation of Pakistan was agreed in August 1947 he guaranteed freedom of religious expression. But it was too late. Violence between Hindus and Muslims had spiralled beyond anyone's ability to control it."

"Hindus and Muslims turned on each other in the chaos of war. In 1942 when the Japanese seized Singapore and Rangoon, advancing rapidly through Burma toward India, the Congress Party began a campaign of civil disobedience. Its leaders, including Gandhi and Nehru, were arrested. Jinnah, insisting he was a loyal ally of the British, sought to gain support as the best protection of Muslim interests against Hindu dominance. By June 1945, Nehru thought that Jinnah represented "an obvious example of the utter lack of the civilised mind." Gandhi called him a "maniac" and "an evil genius."

"From that point on, violence on the streets between Hindus and Muslims began to escalate. People moved away from, or were forced out of, mixed neighbourhoods, taking refuge in what became polarized ghettos. Tensions were heightened by local and regional political leaders. H. S. Suhrawardy, ruthless Muslim League Chief Minister of Bengal, made incendiary speeches in Calcutta, provoking rioters against the Hindu populace. A newspaper article said that bloodshed and disorder were legitimate if "resorted to for a noble cause."

"The first series of religious massacres took place in Calcutta in 1946, partly as a result of Suhrawardy's incitement. Graphic details of appalling incidents were revealed in a death toll of 5,000. American photojournalist Margaret Bourke-White, wrote that Calcutta's streets "looked like Buchenwald," having seen the Nazi death camp the previous year."

"On 20 February 1947 Clement Atlee, announced before Parliament that British rule would end on "a date not later than June, 1948." If Nehru and Jinnah could be reconciled by then, power would transfer to "some form of central Government for British India." If not, they would hand over authority "in such other way as may seem most reasonable and in the best interests of the Indian people." As riots spread and casualties escalated, the Congress Party began to see Partition as the only way to remove the troublesome Jinnah and Muslim League. In April, 1947, Nehru declared, "I want that those who stand as an obstacle in our way should go their own way."

"British exit was speeded up. In March 1947 Louis Mountbatten flew into Delhi as Britain's final Viceroy, his mission to hand over power and get out of India as quickly as possible. A series of disastrous meetings with an intransigent Jinnah convinced him the Muslim League leader was "a psychopathic case," impervious to negotiation. As Hajari states, Mountbatten thought he would end up "refereeing a civil war." Using his considerable charm he persuaded the parties to agree to Partition as the only option."

"In early June, Mountbatten stunned everyone. He announced 15 August 1947 as the date for the transfer of power - ten months earlier than expected. Reasons are still the subject of debate. One theory is shocking the quarrelling parties into the realisation they were hurtling

toward a sectarian precipice. The rush exacerbated the chaos. Cyril Radcliffe, assigned to draw borders, had barely forty days to remake the map of South Asia. The borders were finally announced two days *after* Indian Independence."

"None of the disputants were happy with the compromise forced on them. Jinnah, regarded the truncated portion of India's eastern and western extremities - separated by a thousand miles of Indian territory - as "a maimed, mutilated and moth-eaten" travesty. He warned the partition of Punjab and Bengal "will be sowing the seeds of future serious trouble."

"On the evening of August 14, 1947, in India's Constituent Assembly, Nehru rose to his feet to make his most famous speech. "Long years ago, we made a tryst with destiny. At the stroke of the midnight hour, when the world sleeps, India will awake to life and freedom."

"The same evening, as remaining British officials in Lahore set off for the railway station, they picked their way through streets littered with dead bodies. On platforms, they saw railway staff hose away pools of blood. Hours earlier, a group of Hindus fleeing Delhi were massacred by a Muslim mob as they sat waiting for a train. As the Bombay Express pulled out of Lahore and began its journey south, officials could see Punjab was ablaze, village after village."

"In months, the landscape of South Asia had changed forever. In 1941, Karachi, designated the first capital of Pakistan, was 47.6 per cent Hindu. Think about that – nearly half. Delhi, the capital of independent India, was one-third Muslim. By the end of the decade, almost all Hindus in Karachi had fled, while two hundred thousand Muslims were forced out of Delhi."

Remaining in Denial – by Yasmin Kahn

"On 3 June 1947, only six weeks before British India was carved up, a group of eight men sat around a table in New Delhi and agreed to partition South Asian. Photographs, taken at that moment, reveal haunted and nervous faces: Jawaharlal Nehru, the Indian National Congress leader soon to become independent India's first prime minister, Mohammad Ali Jinnah, head of the Muslim League and Pakistan's first governor-general and Louis Mountbatten, the last British viceroy."

"The public also greeted this agreement with some cautious hope. Nobody who agreed to the plan realised that partition was unleashing one of the worst calamities of the 20th century. Only weeks later, the full scale of the tragedy was apparent."

"Bengal (in the east) and Punjab (in the north-west), were densely populated agricultural regions where Muslims, Hindus and Punjabi Sikhs had cultivated the land side by side for generations. The thought of segregating these two regions was so preposterous that few had ever contemplated it, so no preparations had been made for a population exchange."

"Do you foresee any mass transfer of population?" a journalist asked Mountbatten at a press conference in Delhi, after the plan was announced. "Personally, I don't see it," he replied. "There are many physical and practical difficulties involved. Some measure of transfer will come about in a natural way ... perhaps governments will transfer populations. Once more, this is a matter not so much for the main parties as for the local authorities living in the border areas to decide."

"The borderlines, announced on 17 August – two days after independence – cut right through these two provinces and caused unforeseen turmoil. Perhaps a million people died from ethnic violence and also from diseases rife in makeshift refugee camps."

"The epicentre was Punjab, yet many other places were affected, especially Bengal. Sindh, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Kashmir and Lahore – heir to the architecture of Mughal, Sikh and British rule, and famed for its poets, universities and bookshops – was reduced in large quarters to rubble. In Amritsar, home of the Golden Temple, and also known for its carpet and silk weavers, it took more than five years to clear the wreckage."

"There were more than 600 refugee camps all over the subcontinent, 70,000 women had suffered sexual violence and the issue of the princely states, especially Kashmir, remained unresolved. Many hopes had been cruelly dashed as Partition set off a spiral of unforeseen and unintended events. The dramatic upheavals changed the terms of the settlement."

"The stories make us flinch. Bloated and distorted bodies surfacing in canals months after a riot, young pregnant women left dismembered by roadsides. One newspaper report tells of an unnamed man from a village "whose family had been wiped out", who on meeting Jinnah as he toured the Pakistani camps in 1947, "sobbed uncontrollably." Up to 15 million people left their homes to begin a new life in India or Pakistan, and by September 1947 (just weeks after Partition) formal exchange of people across Punjabi borders had become government policy."

"Many people have collected memories and oral histories in the past decades. Partition history used to be all about the high politics and the relative responsibilities of Mountbatten, Jinnah, Gandhi and Nehru – these four men have always towered over the story, and ultimately their animosities and the reasons they failed to agree on a constitutional settlement make them the leading actors of an enduring and gripping drama – but today many historians are far more interested in the fate of refugees in the camps, the ways in which villagers experienced the uprooting of 1947, or how they rebuilt their lives in the aftermath."

"There is still a mystery at the dark heart of partition. Ultimately, it remains a history layered with absence and silences, even while many mourn and talk about their own trauma. Nearly every Punjabi family – Indian and Pakistani – can tell a tale about a relative uprooted in the night, the old friends and servants left behind, the nostalgia for a cherished house now fallen into new hands. Far fewer are willing to discuss the role of their own locality in contributing to the violence. Rarely, do oral histories tell of culpability and betrayal; more often, guilt and silences stalk the archive."

"Who were the killers? Why did they kill? Much evidence points not to crazy and inexplicable actions of mad, uneducated peasants with sticks and stones, but to well-organised and well-motivated groups of young men, who went out – particularly in Punjab – to carry out ethnic cleansing. These men, often demobilised from the second world war, had been trained in gangs and militias, were in the pay of shopkeepers and landlords, and had often been well drilled and well equipped. They took on the police and even armed soldiers on occasions."

"There are evident parallels with Rwanda and Bosnia, in the collapse of old communities and the simplification of complex identities. Militant leaders tried to make facts on the ground by carving out more land for their own ethnic group. They used modern tactics of propaganda and bloodshed, all familiar today. Many newspapers had caricatured the "other" community for decades. South Asia is still mired in denial."

"Volunteers could be seen marching along the major roads on their way to join the battle in the summer of 1947. Some wore uniforms, were armed with swords, spears and muzzle-loading guns. One gang, intercepted on their return from fighting, even had an armoured elephant. The militias also worked hand in glove with the local leaders of princely states who

channelled funds and arms. They answered to local power brokers and sometimes to the prompts of politicians. This helps explain the scale of the violence.”

“In other places, it was a case of neighbour turning against neighbour, often in a deluded form of “self-defence” or revenge, sometimes as a cover for resolving old family feuds, for getting back at a mercenary landlord, or as a chance to loot. In the main, people were whipped up by demonisation of the other, encouraged by the rhetoric of politicians and a feverish media.”

“The British government had repeatedly delayed granting freedom in the 1930s, when it might have been more amicably achieved. After waiting decades for freedom, this was a moment of intense anxiety and fear. Propaganda had built up during the preceding war years, especially while Gandhi and the Indian National Congress leaders were imprisoned in the 1940s; Jinnah saw the second world war as a blessing in disguise for this reason. Ultimately, 1947 became a perfect storm as many contingencies collided.”

“On the British side, planning was shoddy and the date was rushed forward by a whole year; the original plan was for a British departure in mid-1948. Mountbatten prioritised European lives and made sure he didn’t get British troops entangled in a guerilla war. And the British bungled the details: there was a sweeping idea behind partition but almost nothing in place to deal with how this unparalleled division would be achieved on the ground. The limited military force put in place in July, the Punjab Boundary Force, was understaffed and spread over a vast distance. This was a textbook case of a power vacuum.”

“The British come out of the story looking ill-prepared, naive and even callous. But could they have settled the competing nationalist visions in South Asia in the 1940s, and could they have created a constitution to please everybody? This is the great hypothetical question. Endless rounds of previous negotiations had ended in disappointment and overlaying new nation states over the grid of messy, large, complex empires was a challenge all over the world.”

“Many Muslim Leaguers would have accepted power within a federal, decentralised and unified India in 1946, while many members of the Indian National Congress resisted power-sharing schemes. Ultimately, we just do not know how the alternatives would have worked.

The tragedy of partition is that the stories of extreme violence in 1947 have provided fodder to opposing perspectives ever since, and myths have crystallised, sweeping aside appreciation of the hybrid, Indo-Islamic world that flourished before the British began their conquest in the 18th century. The land in which vernacular Sanskrit-based languages were cross-pollinated with Turkish, Persian, and Arabic, in which Rajput princesses married Mughal rulers, and musical and artistic styles had thrived on the fusion of influences from central Asia and local courtly cultures.” All this has coalesced into 22 official languages and thousands of dialects.

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